ICON Development Group's core focus on customer service has led it to many business opportunities, and it is ramping up for continued growth in McHenry County and beyond.

A Local 'ICON'

| by Erica Burke |

Photography by Arlin Housh

A good business strategy is based on finding an underserved niche and filling it. For ICON Development Group, a development firm based in Algonquin, its leaders are doing just that — with great success — in McHenry County and surrounding counties.

The niche is simply quality craftsmanship and exceptional customer service — two components Customer Experience Director Jenny Rice and Managing Partner Charlie Murphy say are lacking in today's construction and development market.

Whether it's a $1.5 million custom home on Lake Geneva or a $4,500 kitchen makeover in an older neighborhood, ICON's goal remains the same: a quality project on time and on budget to the client's satisfaction completed in a professional manner.

"By creating relationships with contractors, architects and real estate agents who share our ideals, we're building a full-service experience for our customers," Murphy said. "We are very strict about who we partner with. We have a comprehensive list of prerequisites for our contractors and subs who will be representing us in the field."

Technology Investment

Communication is another major factor in ICON's customer satisfaction strategy. That's where ICON's online presence comes into play. Icon's Web site employs software that allows parties involved in the project to view , full-color floor plans, photos, change orders, contracts, specs, bids and proposals without having to be onsite.

"Our technology investment has differentiated us in the industry in a lot of ways," Murphy said. "Having the ability to see everything virtually before ground is even broken gives customers a better feel for the project and helps minimize the expense of changing something after it's completed. Having access to these items 24/7 from anywhere in the world is all-around a more efficient and effective way to do business."

Open Communication

Lack of communication and miscommunication are major hurdles in the construction industry and something ICON strives to avoid, even if it means being "too hands on." "Customers need help translating the nuances of homebuilding," Rice said. "I use my design/creative expertise and customer service skills to break down the details into useful information for our clients, as well as guide them in making design choices that make sense.

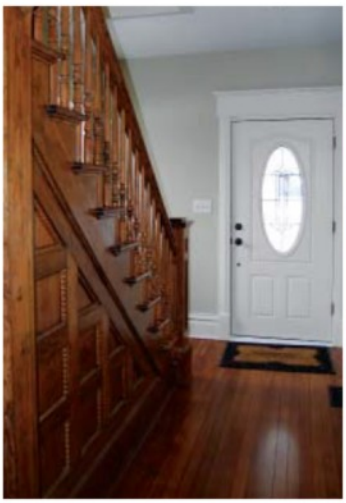
"My job is to take the stress out of this often overwhelming process and focus daily on how to serve the customer," she added.

Staff Strengths

Successful firms are due in no small part to the strong leaders at the helm. ICON knew early on to hire leaders whose distinctive strengths would complement each other.

Murphy brings with him a background in business, strategic planning and real estate development. Production Manager John Matustik, who is a partner in the firm, is a master builder who also has some architectural experience in his background. Rice's background is in customer service, marketing and design. "We need each other," Murphy said.

As ICON grows, Murphy said it will continue hiring professionals with values and strengths compatible with its quality and customer-service mission.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ICON's Managing Partner Charlie Murphy and Customer Experience Director Jenny Rice said they are focused on creating a full-service experience for customers. When renovating a 130-year-old home in Crystal Lake, ICON reconfigured the fireplace in the addition, freeing up space. The gourmet kitchen was completely rehabbed, and features a decorative metal backsplash. ICON preserved historical touches like the wood staircase in the foyer.

ICON's foundation is also built with support of a strong outside network. For example, ICON works closely with Chicagoland real estate guru Tyler Lewke and his Crystal Lake firm Lewke Partners. "It's been a mutually beneficial kinship," Murphy said. "Tyler gave us the lead on the historic Walkup property, which we bought upon seeing it." ▶

Well-Oiled Machine

Charlie Murphy's business acumen began about 20 years ago fighting cooking grease. Charlie Murphy, managing partner of ICON Development, is not new to finding success in filling niches. In 1989, he and three college friends developed a filter system that captures the cooking grease that builds up in the ventilation systems of commercial kitchens. Previously, these systems would occasionally be power washed and the residual grease would get trapped in the roofs, causing expensive damage to the buildings, as well as creating fire, environmental and safety hazards. The team's proprietary systems and filter replacements were well received in the industry and soon, the top restaurant chains in the country had them installed nationwide.

The partners sold the company in 2000, and Murphy left in 2001 to pursue real estate projects.

Notable Projects

ICON is a fast-growing firm with about 40 percent of business made up of custom homes; 25 percent developments; and 35 percent renovations and additions. Municipal and commercial projects, and investment properties also account for a portion of contracts. Recent projects include:

- A $1.5 million custom home in Prairie Grove;
- A custom home that was featured in the 2008 Luxury Home Tour;
- The renovation of a 130-year-old Victorian home in downtown Crystal Lake;
- Custom homes on Powers Lake and Lake Geneva in Wis.;
- Single-family homes in the Villas of Hidden Lake in Buffalo Grove, Ill.;
- Home additions in Algonquin, Lake Geneva and Long Grove, Ill.; and
- A home renovation in Barrington, Ill.

ICON took this beautiful Victorian home and renovated it inside and out, completely updating it with modern amenities while restoring its historic charm wherever possible. Its open houses have drawn healthy crowds for this time of year. "There's been a lot of interest," Murphy said.

'On the Upside'

Stories about falling home sales and slow construction have dominated the media for years now, but Murphy says "things are on the upside" and prices are on the rise. It's what you do during the tough times, he said, that make a difference on the other side.

"In a down market during turbulent times, you have to focus on doing the right thing," he said. "You have to stay positive and do what you have to do to make it work. Today, we can't get to the opportunities fast enough. There's a lot of activity. The phones are ringing. We're in growth mode."

Referrals and positive word of mouth are major contributors to ICON's growth, and that's why customer service is key.

"You get back what you put into a project," Murphy said. "We don't leave a project until the customer feels good about it. Our goal is to deliver a house 'on time, on budget, or else.' For every day we're late on a project, we'll pay the owner up to $1,000. And once all parties agree on a price, we never go back to the customer with changes."

ICON plans to continue pursuing a variety of construction and renovation projects in McHenry County and beyond while building its staff to support its growth. ■

>> ICON is located at 2413 W. Algonquin Rd., Suite 247 in Algonquin. For more, call 815-444-7400 or visit www.icon-360.com